

The harsh account of a U.S. doctor who broke down in tears before a UN committee explaining the situation in Gaza

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Dr Tanya Haj-Hassan could not hold back her tears as she read testimonies from her colleagues in Gaza before a UN Committee in New York in November.

Dr. Tanya Haj-Hassan is a specialist in pediatric intensive care and has traveled to Gaza multiple times over the past decade to teach medicine.

But nothing prepared this American doctor for the scale of what she saw there over the past 14 months.

In recent testimony before a United Nations Committee in New York, Haj Hassan could not hold back her tears as she recounted her experience as a volunteer at a hospital in central Gaza.

"As one of the few international observers allowed into Gaza, I can tell you: spend just five minutes in a hospital there and it will become painfully clear to you that Palestinians are being intentionally massacred, starved and stripped of everything necessary to sustain life," the doctor said in her testimony.

"Our colleagues are being killed in record numbers... We have held the hands of children taking their last breaths with only a stranger to comfort them," she added.

Israeli military operations in Gaza have left more than 44,000 dead, including more than 17,000 children, and more than 100,000 wounded, according to data from the Gaza Ministry of Health.

More than 11,000 people are still missing, likely under rubble, according to the Palestinian civil defence.

Below is the conversation that Tanya Haj-Hassan had with BBC Mundo.

You said in your testimony before the UN that it is enough to spend five minutes in a hospital in Gaza to know what is happening there. Tell us about your experience.

Hospitals are full of wounded, mutilated, dying, sick from epidemics, emaciated, very, very thin patients.

I am a doctor. We specialise in maintaining life. And in the hospital I was in, it seems that everything we would like to provide to patients to maintain their health, from safety from traumatic injuries and diseases to nutrition, is impossible and patients are dying from all of these things.

In wars, normally when you enter an emergency department, most of the wounded people you will see will be young men of fighting age.

In Gaza, we are seeing people from the cradle to the grave, from newborns to the elderly, women, men, entire families, so it is very clear that Israel is killing Palestinians in Gaza indiscriminately by violent means, but also by starvation, disease and conditions that have been deliberately created so that life is not sustainable.

Could you share with us some of the stories you mentioned in your testimony?

When I was in Gaza I made notes in a small diary. Here I have it.

Let me read you some notes. "March 14, rampant hepatitis A, several fatalities, a baby died of marasmus (severe caloric malnutrition)"...

Another day I wrote: "An intensive care doctor with a broken arm intubated a patient. The doctor had been injured in an Israeli attack, he returned to work with a cast on his arm and performed the necessary procedures using only his fingers because he could not move his arm..."

I have so many cases in my diary. Sohan, Heba, Mashan, Hassan, Ali, Ibrahim...

Tell us about the first case you reported at the UN, tell us about the mother...

I remember her very well. Her husband brought her in. She was in a wheelchair and was holding her stomach. Her gaze was blank; I tried to talk to her but she was not responding.

The husband told me that she had given birth seven days ago. And I said, where is the baby? And he shook his head and said, 'We can't find the baby or his little brother, we think they are trapped under the rubble.'

She was just speechless. Children often came to the emergency room with that same look, silent, with their pupils wide open, with a blank stare.

It's pure trauma. Honestly, I can't even find the words to describe what I saw. I can't imagine how they process in their mind what is happening to them.

She spoke at the UN about Mohamed, the 5-year-old boy with very small hands...

I'll read you what I wrote in my notebook. "Mohamed, 5 years old, entry and exit wound through the skull, looks like a gunshot, no intensive care beds."

He was too unstable to be taken for a CT scan and died on the resuscitation table.

The diary says: "Taken to the morgue, no parents, hands and feet so small, last expressions: of pain."

We doctors took him to the morgue because he had no surviving relatives.

I have cried so many times because of the stories I am reading.

In paediatrics, in other places where I have worked, it rarely happens that a child dies without anyone around.

Normally you have a mother at the bedside who is sobbing, you have a family who is grieving, they decide how they want to bury the child.

In Gaza, it is different. In Mohamed's case there was no one, they think the family was killed in the same attack.

I am talking about children, but obviously this is happening to mothers, fathers, cousins, siblings, sons, daughters, everyone.

He wanted to send us this photo above, as he tries to save two cousins ??he spoke about at the UN, Mohammad and Massa...

They were very small, we tried to resuscitate them on the same stretcher. They arrived among many victims when an entire apartment building was hit by a missile and collapsed, and more than 40 people died, including several members of Mohammad and Massa's extended family.

Mohammad was very small and pale and we couldn't determine where he was bleeding. Even with an ultrasound, we couldn't find a vein to put an IV in him. He was dehydrated, his blood vessels were collapsed.

He probably had a hemorrhage somewhere, maybe in his brain. He died on the table while we were trying to resuscitate him.

And Massa initially looked fine but started to lose consciousness. We did a head scan on him, he had a traumatic brain injury and went into a coma.

We needed blood for both children and I remember the blood bank saying that blood was running out and that they didn't have any O-negative type to give us because of the large number of patients.

The Gazans themselves are malnourished and are donating blood.

When I left Gaza, Massa was in intensive care. I heard that his parents were injured, I don't know if they survived. Even if Massa survives he will probably have a significant disability.

But I want to emphasize that these are not exceptional cases. Every person I met in Gaza lost relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbors who were killed.

You referred especially to the attacks on health workers in Gaza. The World Health Organization said in October that since October 7, 2023, nearly 1,000 health workers have been killed in Gaza.

Health workers and health facilities have been targeted for years.

I even wrote about this in an article in The Lancet in 2014, when a pediatric ICU was hit three times.

But since October last year, health workers have died in record numbers. They were killed, they were injured, they were illegally detained. And those who were released reported physical, psychological and sexual torture.

I don't have an explanation, I don't know why you would target health workers unless you are trying to destroy everything necessary to sustain life. Doctors represent hope, the will to stay alive.

I asked some of my colleagues who were detained and released why they thought they were a target and one of them said: "Israeli soldiers called me with the words: 'You, the person in the gown, come with me,'" and one of the nurses said, "I was told 'you, the nurse, come here.'"

So they weren't even called by their name when they were detained but by their profession.

In her testimony she read messages from her colleagues in Gaza. And she was brought to tears by the message from Saed, a nurse: "I want the whole world to know that I am a human being, a human being created by God."

You have spoken of the dehumanisation of Palestinians, how do you explain that the world is not taking stronger measures to protect them?

Honestly, I don't know how one can remain silent in the face of this level, this severity and speed of human destruction. Unless you see Palestinian lives as of lesser value.

There has been an exceptionalism when it comes to Palestinians and their rights.

Not just since October last year, for my entire life.

And I know the media has a huge role to play in that.

In many mainstream media, Palestinian children are never children, but Israeli children are children. Palestinians don't have names, Israelis have names. Palestinians die passively from some unknown cause, they are never actively killed by an identified perpetrator. It's really shocking.

I can't remember which media outlet in the UK described Israeli soldiers from the Golan Heights brigades who were killed in an attack as "teenage victims." They were 19 years old and were officers in the occupation army.

But in the case of 14-year-old Palestinians who are being imprisoned under administrative detention without charge and facing military courts, somehow it's not news that they are children.

I'm a pediatrician. I know what is technically a child and what is technically not a child, and Palestinian children are not allowed to be children. They are stripped of their innocence. They are stripped of their humanity and their identity. They are always anonymous.

Dr. Haj-Hassan, you said before the UN that one day "someone will unearth these testimonies" and "we will have to face what happened..." Can you explain this?

There is a treaty called the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The thing is that you cannot cure genocide, but you can prevent it. Then you punish those responsible.

We have failed to prevent genocide. And I am not just talking about since October last year. The Palestinian population has been subjected to slow ethnic cleansing for decades.

Two-thirds of Gaza's population are refugees from other parts of Palestine. During my testimony, I said that in 2019, when I was at Al Shifa hospital in Gaza, I personally witnessed a teenager being shot in the neck while peacefully protesting during the so-called Great March of Return.

Israel and countries like the U.S. and UK reject that what is happening in Gaza is genocide and say that Israelis have the right to defend themselves against the threat of Hamas.

Amnesty International, a UN committee, and Israel's own proclamation of genocidal intent do not agree with that position. I think this is no longer a matter of debate.

What action did you ask for at the UN?

What action do I expect? I have been waiting for action for decades. I have been waiting for all the UN resolutions to be respected, but they have been violated time and time again.

And in particular regarding the U.S. veto of a ceasefire in Gaza again and again in the Security Council, how do you justify vetoing a resolution to stop atrocities?

Honestly, as a people, and when I say as a people I mean health workers and everyone in civil society, we are fed up with the lies, the hypocrisy, the propaganda, the attempt to justify the unjustifiable.

Finally, Dr Haj-Hassan, you ended your testimony by saying that the bravery of Palestinian health workers should be an example for all of us. And you ended with a question: What are we risking?

What did you mean?

I had several colleagues at the hospital where I worked before, in a country in the global North, who took me aside to say: "We agree with what you're doing, we're proud of you." But they did it quietly, behind closed doors.

Other colleagues told me: "I wish I could talk about this like you do, but I support my family and I'm worried about the impact this would have on my work."

Basically, people are worried about the clear oppression against those who speak out against genocide and in favor of protecting the Palestinian people.

So I asked that question at the UN. I asked it because speaking out will always have a cost.

Not a single person in history who fought against injustice, who fought for the end of slavery or for the end of South African apartheid did not pay a price.

Everyone will have to pay a price when they reject an injustice that is so widespread, so entrenched in dominant power structures.

What were the consequences in your case?

Some people risk not only losing their jobs but even their safety. I have received multiple death threats. And I know many people who have spoken out and received death threats.

You interviewed Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya at Kamal Adwan Hospital. He lost his son, he himself was injured a few days ago. And he refuses to leave his hospital.

Our Palestinian colleagues have lost a lot and yet they continue to work according to their values.

The question I asked at the UN is directed at all of us who feel comfortable or worried about sacrificing that comfort by saying something we know should be said, but are afraid of how it will be received.

My question is directed at all of you sitting at home, who are horrified by what is happening, but who do nothing because you are afraid of the repercussions.

[SOURCE: BBC]

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